

## Did the Resurrection Really Take Place?

The resurrection is unique to world religions that centre on a personality: Abraham (Judaism), Mohammed (Islam), Buddhism (Buddha), Christ (Christianity). There have been no claims ever that Abraham, Mohammed or Buddha came back from the grave. If one was to visit their tombs today, one would find human remains. The tomb of Christ, however, contained nothing but grave clothes. On many occasions Jesus prophesied this very thing,<sup>a</sup> and angels reminded his followers of that fact.<sup>b</sup> The third day is a prominent feature of the OT. Especially noteworthy is the theophany at Sinai (Exodus 19:11, 15-16). The third day experience at Sinai confirmed the role of Moses as God's chief spokesman to Israel. The third day confirmed Christ as the Son of God. Michael Green writes:

Christianity does not hold the resurrection to be among many tenets of belief. Without faith in the resurrection there would be no Christianity at all. The Christian church would never have begun; the Jesus-movement would have fizzled out like a damp squib [firecracker] with its execution. Christianity stands or falls with the truth of the resurrection. Once disprove it, and you have disposed of Christianity.<sup>1</sup>

The author of a best-selling book that argued for the resurrection was written by an agnostic lawyer who had made a promise that one day, when he had the time, he would write a book disproving the resurrection ever took place. After diligent research he gave his heart to Christ and penned his best seller - *Who Moved the Stone?*<sup>2</sup>

### Read: 1 Corinthians 15

One of the arguments made against the Christian faith is that as the gap of time between the crucifixion of Christ and the writing of the Gospels increased, myths and exaggerations began to develop around what really happened. We need to keep in mind however, that the New Testament is not put together in chronological order. In other words, because Matthew is the first book of the New Testament we might assume that it was written first. This is not the case. Although we cannot know the actual date each book or epistle (letter) was written, we can make reasonable guesses based on clues in the writings.

1 Corinthians may be safely dated between AD 53-55.<sup>3</sup> Two references in Acts 18 help us place Paul's first visit to Corinth in the early 50's: that a Jew named Aquila had recently come from Italy because Claudius had ordered all the Jews to leave Rome (v2), and that Gallio was proconsul (v12). Roman records indicate that Gallio would have been in Corinth from A.D. 51, and was there only a short time,<sup>4c</sup> leaving after only one year for health reasons.<sup>5</sup> We also know that Claudius expelled the Jews sometime in the early 50's.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Matthew 16:21; 17:23; 20:19; Luke 13:32; 18:33

<sup>2</sup>Luke 24:6-8

<sup>3</sup>This fact presents a reliable date from which all of Paul's journey's have been calculated.

Thus Paul's letter to the church at Corinth indicates that many of the core doctrines of the church, including the resurrection, were in place even before the Gospel accounts were written. In the letter to Corinth Paul clearly states that the resurrection is central to the story of Christ, and that without it, "your faith is futile; you are still in your sins."<sup>d</sup> Today's lesson will focus on some of the key objections raised by skeptics in arguing against the resurrection of Christ, and will show you how those arguments can be easily refuted.

### **Importance of the Resurrection<sup>7</sup>**

1. *Fulfills the many prophecies of Jesus*
2. *Fulfills the prophecies of the OT*
  - a. Isaiah 53, though not explicitly mentioning a resurrection verse 11 implies such
  - b. Psalm 16:10, Peter quotes this passage in his Pentecost sermon (Acts 2:25-27)
  - c. Psalm 49:7-9, Jesus was more than a man
3. *The resurrection of Jesus was core to the preaching of the Gospel by the early church and remains so today*
4. *Major doctrines of the Christian faith are dependant on it*
  - a. Salvation by faith
    - i. Paul notes that without the resurrection or faith is futile
  - b. Jesus as intercessor
    - i. Hebrews 1:3, 8:1, 10:12, 12:2
  - c. Justification
    - i. Romans 4:22-25
  - d. The Second Coming dependant upon the resurrection
    - i. Phil 3:20-21, we don't look to the grave for Jesus return, but to heaven
  - e. Our eternal hope
    - i. Romans 8:11

### **Skeptical Theories Regarding the Resurrection**

#### **5. The Swoon Theory**

- a. Jesus didn't actually die on the cross, but only fainted and went into a deep state of unconsciousness
- b. being mistaken for dead, he was buried
- c. the coolness of the tomb revived him
- d. Originally put forward by a man called Venturini over 200 years ago, has enjoyed a comeback in Muslim arguments against the resurrection
- e. **Rebuttal:**
  - i. crucifixion was by design a very cruel form of punishment intended to inflict maximum suffering and lead to eventual death of the victim
  - ii. Jesus would have had to survive: a beating, being scourged, physical and mental exhaustion, being nailed to a cross (through hands and feet), exposure, and being impaled by a spear – all with out any medical treatment whatsoever

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<sup>d</sup>1 Corinthians 15:17

- (1) Eusebius, an early church historian noted of the victim of a scourging: his “veins were laid bare, and the very muscles, sinews, and bowels of the victim were open to exposure.”<sup>8</sup>
- (2) fossil evidence of a victim of crucifixion features a nail driven through the overlapped heels of the victim, adding credence to traditional view of Christ being nailed to the cross<sup>9</sup>
- iii. Mark 15:44-45 notes that Pilate summoned the Centurion from the scene of the crucifixion to ascertain whether Jesus was dead or not. The Centurion surely would, after years of practice, know a dead man.
- iv. He would have had to unwrap the burial bindings, somehow move the covering stone and fought off the guards
  - (1) Professor James Hastings writes: ...myrrh was a drug which adheres so closely to the body that the grave clothes would not easily be removed.<sup>10</sup>
  - (2) the bandages were customarily strips of cloth about a foot in width. The spices would have a ‘gummy consistency’ that would serve as preservative and cement to glue the bands of cloth together.<sup>11</sup>
- v. Scripture records (John 20:5-7) that the grave clothes lay neatly
  - (1) In John 11:44 Jesus instructed those present to unwrap Lazarus from similar binding, indicating that Lazarus would be unable to do so himself
  - (2) John Stott notes that the weight of 100lbs of spices would have collapsed the bindings once the supporting body left
- vi. Jesus would make multiple appearances in various places, even walking for many miles with two disciples (Luke 24:13-15)
  - (1) surely his presence at these occasions reinforced the belief that he had conquered death, not barely survived it

## **6. The Hallucination Theory**

- a. The disciples and followers of Jesus were so overcome by grief that they imagined they saw him
- b. **Rebuttal:**
  - i. 1 Corinthians 15:6 records five hundred people at once saw him
  - ii. Medical knowledge precludes such a magnitude possessing the mental condition necessary for such a hallucination
  - iii. Instead of desiring his appearance or expecting it, the disciples were hard to convince that the resurrection took place
  - iv. Mark 14:50 and Luke 24:21 hint that the mindset of the disciples argues against this theory
  - v. It is unlikely for even two people to have the same hallucination
  - vi. It was not only that they saw Jesus, they also had visitations from angels who gave them instructions
  - vii. Appearances were not limited to one or two places at specific times, they were quite random in nature, and by some who even doubted he had risen
  - viii. This theory argues against the Impersonation Theory

## **7. The Impersonation Theory**

- a. Stems from the fact that many did not at first recognize Jesus, obviously then it must have been someone else impersonating the risen Christ

**b. Rebuttal:**

- i. The eleven had spent over three years in close contact with Jesus, eating with him, being taught by him, and travelling the countryside with him
- ii. Jesus appeared to the disciples in a locked room, the intent of the disciples was to keep anyone out
- iii. That they didn't recognize him argues against the Hallucination Theory, and the Hallucination Theory argues against this theory. The truth that this was Jesus best fits.
- iv. Luke 24:16 indicates that they were kept from recognizing

**8. The Spiritual Theory**

- a. Instead of a physical resurrection, the resurrection was spiritual, ie: the biblical account is a metaphor for spiritual resurrection.<sup>12</sup>

**b. Rebuttal:**

- i. No body was ever produced by authorities to counter the resurrection story
- ii. Matthew tells us that the authorities took steps to preclude theft of the body (Matthew 27:63-66), therefore they should have been able to produce one.
- iii. Jesus ate with the disciples (Luke 24:39, John 21:12), invited them to touch him (John 20:27)
- iv. Paul preached the need of Christ's bodily resurrection
- v. Jesus resurrection body had unique capabilities (appearing at will, passing through objects), though it must be remembered that his physical body also had the unique capability of walking on water

**9. The Theft Theory**

- a. Matthew 28:11-15 records the roots of this theory, that the disciples had stolen the body
- b. That this view had indeed spread among the Jews is evident in Justin's *Dialogue Against Trypho*<sup>e</sup> where the Jewish writer Trypho argues: ...one Jesus, a Galilean deceiver, whom we crucified; but his disciples stole him by night from the tomb...

**c. Rebuttal:**

- i. See above Matthew 27:63-66, guards were posted, a seal was set – all to prevent this very thing from happening
  - (1) Sealing was performed by stretching a cord across the stone a fastening it to the rocks at either side with clay, embossed with some mark of Roman authority. The whole point of sealing was to prevent collusion between guards and thieves, or the guards themselves stealing contents.
- ii. The guards: most likely Roman, would be too disciplined to allow this to take place. Punishment for allowing theft to take place would have been severe. The following are examples of documented cases of disciplinary actions:<sup>13</sup>
  - (1) standard bearer lagging in battle; punishment, slain by general's own hand
  - (2) asleep on duty; punishment, hurled from the cliff of the Capitolium

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<sup>e</sup>In *Dialogue* Justin Martyr engaged in a polite public debate with Trypho, a Hellenized Jew, in AD 135 Ephesus

- (3) negligence; punishment, beaten and rank reduced
- iii. Cover stone being moved would have required the effort of many men. The ladies who went to the tomb to anoint the body wondered: "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance of the tomb?" And looking up, they saw that the stone had been rolled away, although it was extremely large."
  - (1) an addition to an early manuscript dated to the second century notes: And when he was laid there, he [Joseph] put against the tomb a stone which twenty men could not roll away.<sup>14</sup>
- iv. The wording of the stone being moved in John 20:1 leans more to it being *lifted* out of the way as opposed to being *rolled*.
- v. It would have been impossible for the disciples to steal the body, the authorities had nothing to gain by removing the body, therefore the only plausible explanation is that Jesus did as he said he would do - that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.<sup>f</sup>

### 10. **Ops! Wrong Tomb Theory**

- a. Because of the number of tombs around Jerusalem, the grief of the women, and the distance from which they watched Jesus being entombed, when they returned the following morning they went to the wrong tomb, one that had yet to be closed (hence the stone rolled away).
- b. **Rebuttal:**
  - i. Ridiculous to suggest that so precious a tomb would be forgotten
  - ii. Does not address the presence of the angels (both outside and inside the tomb)
  - iii. Does not address the presence of the grave clothes
  - iv. The authorities could have visited the *right* tomb to discount the story

### General Rebuttal

The growth of the early church is the best argument against all the above theories. The followers of Jesus went from being a disorganized and dejected group of about one hundred twenty (Acts 1:14-15) to several thousand in no time at all. The disciples themselves had fled and went into hiding on account of fear. What besides the truth of the resurrection would transform them into men so convinced that Jesus was the risen Saviour that they would finally fulfill the pledge they had broken on the night of his arrest. They died for their faith.

Hebrews 11:35-37 recounts the state of the early believers - they "*were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned ; they were saved in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated...*"

Sherlock Holmes, the fictional detective remarked: When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth."<sup>15</sup> Paul reminds us that without the truth of the resurrection, our faith is futile. The resurrection is at the

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<sup>v</sup>Matthew 16:21

core of Peter's powerful Pentecost sermon.

The testimony of the early church fathers also points to the resurrection. Clement, writing to the church in A.D. 95, affirms the resurrection. It has been pointed out that if one were to write an autobiography of J.F. Kennedy, who died forty years ago, filled with erroneous facts, there would be plenty written and said in rebuttal. No such rebuttal evidence exists for the resurrection.

That the Sabbath would be moved from Saturday to Sunday indicates the degree of belief in the resurrection. Sunday became the traditional day of worship in the Christian church in honor of the resurrection. The Sabbath was one of the longest standing and deepest commitments made by Jews.

The changed lives and the emphatic witness of Christians even when faced with death. A test to determine allegiance to the Emperor came in the form of offering a pinch of incense on an altar. Those who refused to do so, and Christians were the target of this test, were immediately imprisoned and/or executed. The pagan scholar Lucian wrote:

The poor wretches have convinced themselves that they are going to be immortal and live for all time. So they despise death and willingly give themselves into custody, most of them. Furthermore, their first lawgiver persuaded them that they are all brothers, after they have transgressed by denying the gods, worshipping that crucified sophist [Christ] himself, and living under his laws.<sup>16</sup>

### **The Appearances of Christ**

Mary Magdalene: John 20:14, Mark 16:9

To women returning from the tomb: Matthew 28:9,10

To Peter later in the day: Luke 24:34, 1 Corinthians 15:5

On the Emmaus road: Luke 24:13-33

To the Apostles (Thomas missing): Luke 24:36-43, John 20:19-24

To the Apostles (Thomas present): John 20:26-29

By the sea: John 21:1-23

To the 500: 1 Corinthians 15:7

To the eleven: Matthew 28:16-20, Mark 16:14-20, Luke 24:33-52

To James: 1 Corinthians 15:7

At the ascension: Acts 1: 3-12

To Paul: Acts 9:3-6, 1 Corinthians 15:8

To Stephen: Acts 7:55

To Paul in the temple: Acts 22:17-21; 23:11

To John on Patmos: Revelation 1:10-19

## Endnotes

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1. Quoted in Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (Arrowhead Springs: Campus Crusade for Christ International, 1972), 189.
2. Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (Arrowhead Springs: Campus Crusade for Christ International, 1972), 190 & 197.
3. Gordon Fee, *NICOT: 1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), 15.
4. Ted Byfield, ed., *The Christians: The Veil is Torn* (Christian Millennial History Project, 2002), 140.
5. F.F. Bruce, *The Spreading Flame* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1958), 21. History records that he went on an extended cruise.
6. F.F. Bruce, *The Spreading Flame* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1958 ), 21.
7. Tim Lahaye, *Jesus, Who is He?* (Sisters: Multnomah Books, 1996), 231-.
8. Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (Arrowhead Springs: Campus Crusade for Christ International, 1972), 204.
9. Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 200-201.
10. Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (Arrowhead Springs: Campus Crusade for Christ International, 1972), 214.
11. Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (Arrowhead Springs: Campus Crusade for Christ International, 1972), 214.
12. Steve Wilson, CSI: Resurrection, *Faith and Friends*, March 2005, 5.
13. Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (Arrowhead Springs: Campus Crusade for Christ International, 1972), 222.
14. Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (Arrowhead Springs: Campus Crusade for Christ International, 1972), 216.
15. As quoted in Steve Wilson, CSI: Resurrection, *Faith and Friends*, March 2005, 5.
16. Ted Byfield, ed., *The Christians: A Pinch of Incense* (Christian Millennial History Project, 2002), 95.